

\* Disclaimer: Many aspects of a graduate degree vary depending on one's field/department/school. This information falls into the *'what I wish I had known'* category of suggestions evolving from recent personal experience in Graduate School at Indiana University Bloomington.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SURVIVING GRADUATE SCHOOL

### General Suggestions:

1. **Publication Hack:**

Think of every final paper for the grad classes you take as an opportunity for publication (even if in the end you don't attempt to get every paper published). This mindset will help you to develop a scholarly identity, alongside the publication mentality needed at an R1 institution such as IU.

2. **Keep Track of Journals:**

Keep a running list of top-tier publications in your field. This will help you to align your papers to appropriate publishing venues in the future and help you to set goals for where you would like your work to appear.

On that note, read publications from these top-tier journals for insights into the structure of accepted papers. Reading examples of accepted mentor texts is the best way to acclimate yourself to a committee's specific writing style preference.

3. **C.V. Hack:**

When first creating/updating your scholarly C.V. ask professors in your field (whose work you admire) for a copy of theirs and emulate the structure and information they outline in their credentials. This will help you prioritize the appropriate information valued in your field.

4. **Citation Management:**

Keep a running list of the articles you read and publish and cite. Doing so makes replicating these sources much easier in the Reference section of yours papers, such as a thesis or dissertation. The best way to accomplish this is through citation management software such as [EndNote](#), Zotero, and/or Mendeley. Many of these systems are available for free download from [IUware](#).

Carefully choose the name you use to publish, because if you end up changing your legal name (i.e., by preference, marriage, divorce, etc.), having publications under multiple names makes it more difficult for an interested reader to review your collective oeuvre. As of 2021, ProQuest requires an author to have one's LEGAL name on a thesis or dissertation, so keep this in mind as you choose your scholarly identity.

5. **Use University Resources:**

[IU Librarians](#) are magical people. They will help you learn how to use EndNote, for example. They can help you set up an [IUScholarworks](#) page and link your publications to your personal website (sidenote, do this). The [Social Science Research Commons](#) will help you figure out tools and techs to help you succeed as a scholar/student. The [IU Center for Survey Research](#) will help you with Qualtrics and setting up survey tools. If you require this type of assistance, there are IU librarians and Centers designated to help graduate students with these exact needs.

**6. Choose Your Committee Wisely:**

Be very intentional when choosing your committee members by quietly inquiring into any political warfare amongst your committee before choosing. Candidates can sometimes become the spoil of personal differences between committee members.

**7. Cultivate Collegiate Relationships:**

While it may feel like your cohort (or the individuals who started your program at the same time as you) are your competitors – especially if this is a department’s culture – this does not have to be the case. Connect with and consider your classmates as colleagues. Upon graduation, these individuals will be the ones to converse with about publications and can serve to develop your scholarly perspective. Also, consider interdisciplinary groups to get you out of your comfort zone and introduce you to new ways of thinking. Try to cultivate these relationships, especially with people who entered grad school slightly ahead of you. These individuals may turn out to be invaluable mentors who help you to navigate the difficulties of graduate school.

**8. Mentorship:**

This is quite possibly the most important item on this list. Find and cultivate relationships with individuals who can be role models, mentors, sponsors, and/or coaches (these are each [different roles](#)). Keep in mind that one person cannot possibly cover all your mentoring needs, and it is best to have a network of people who can listen, guide, and provide you with opportunities for growth and understanding.

If you are looking to find a mentor or become one yourself, we highly recommend that you start at the [Graduate Mentoring Center](#). This invaluable resource will guide you to find a mentor and develop your own skillset as a mentor.

## **Proposal Suggestion:**

**1. Listen to Advice from Experts:**

Be open to suggestions from your committee and try not to take their suggestions too personally. In theory, they are *in your corner* and are trying to help make you the most marketable and successful scholar you can be.

## **Qualifying Examination (Quals) Suggestion:**

**1. Adopt a Growth Mindset:**

Your quals are meant to prepare you for what lies ahead at the end of your graduate studies, so try not to put too much stress or fear of failure on yourself during this task. The Qualifying Exams are a learning opportunity which should help you prepare your thesis or dissertation. Treat this step as a way to organize your work, rather than view it as a quantitative assessment of your capabilities as a scholar. The writing for your quals often becomes the first three chapters (or so) of your dissertation, so use it as a steppingstone for writing the rest of your dissertation.

## Thesis/Dissertation Suggestions:

### 1. Get Consent:

No matter what type of research you complete, with whom you are working, or what type of IRB protocols you need, be sure to get the 'okay' **in writing** from any gatekeepers for your research, far in advance of completing any data collection.

### 2. Join a Writing Group:

The Writing Tutorial Services has several options; often your own department will have something along these lines. The [Global Studies Graduate Group](#), The [Center of Excellence for Women & Technology's Graduate Group](#), IU GPSG will often have recurring writing groups (sometimes with free coffee/snacks/etc.). Go habitually, thank this document later.

### 3. Look at Examples:

Through ProQuest, obtain recent dissertations approved by each of your committee members, on a topic close to yours. Print one of each and keep them in front of you as you go through the stage of cranking out sections. Compare the skeletons of each of the 'approved' dissertations and forge a conglomerate creation of those mentor texts.

### 4. Back Up Your Back-Ups:

Invest in an external hard drive and cloud option and back up every-single-day you work on our dissertation to avoid heart attacks from technical malfunction (e.g., if your computer crashes). This happened to both authors of this document.

### 5. Get Editors:

Have many qualified folks edit your work before initially submitting to your committee; they are not impressed by sloppy work. Be sure that you offer to edit for them in return.

### 6. Meet Regularly with Committee Members:

Meet individually and frequently (monthly at least) with each of your committee members as you prepare your thesis or dissertation text. Document these meetings through a recap email, so no surprises arise at the defense (i.e.- they can't object to what they previously approved).

### 7. Content Tips:

- Choose a topic you are deeply interested in because it will absolutely TAKE OVER your life for 3-5 years. You'll forget how to talk about anything else.
- Don't make your 'dedicated to' and/or acknowledgements too cheesy because they will be on the internet forever.
- Throughout the writing process, make sure you include definitions of terminology particular to your topic and have strong transitions between sections. Write clearly

but not pedantically, as if you have a committee member outside your field (which may well be the case) who may not be familiar with articles cited on your topic.

- Important personal communications with specific scholars, from discussions at conferences, or in emails are great citations and should be incorporated if appropriate to the topic.
- Make sure your conclusion incorporates the dissertations findings/compared with pre-research hypotheses.

## **Ideas for a Great Defense:**

### **Before the Defense:**

#### **1. Administrative Help:**

Work closely with the administrative assistant of your department to ensure your department knows you are at this stage of your degree. This person may also help reserve a presentation space to hold the defense (if you will be meeting in person) and can inform you about other requirements and deadlines specific to your department.

#### **2. Attendees:**

Invite supportive friends and family members to attend your defense for good-vibe creation in the dissertation space; committees are less likely to be snarky with visitors present (be sure your committee welcomes guests).

### **During the Defense:**

#### **3. Arrive early:**

Whether you are defending in person or via Zoom, arrive early to set up the presentation and troubleshoot the technology. If the dissertation is in person, consider providing a food/drink spread for those attending (this may vary depending on the culture of your department). You may consider having copies of key slides of your presentation for your committee members, or even note pads and pens for them to jot down thoughts. If you decide to go this route, ask a colleague/friend to help facilitate these elements of the event, so you are not frantically trying to manage your presentation and serve refreshments, etc. to attending guests.

#### **4. Record Your Presentation:**

With explicit permission from your committee members, video or audio record the session, especially when you are receiving feedback from these individuals. In the moment, you are under a lot of stress and may not remember important details/nuances spoken.

#### **5. Proceed Slowly:**

In the moment, it is easy to speed through your presentation and speak at a rate that could break the sound barrier. Plan pauses in your presentation and take deep breaths to remind yourself to take your time.

Rehearse your dissertation in the very same room of your defense presentation, including verbiage, walking patterns, PowerPoint speed, lighting effects, gestures, etc. Leave nothing to chance for the big day. Usually, a dissertation presentation is 30 minutes long followed by 30 minutes of committee and guest questions. Rehearse the timing many, many times to nail down the correct length. Carefully choose professional and comfortable clothing and realize your committee and guests will be staring directly at you in a seated position in a chair during the questions following your presentation.

### After the Defense:

6. **Recognize:** You likely will have edits to make to the final dissertation/thesis. You need to recognize this may take a significant amount of time, and that you may need help realizing the final document.

On that note, the graduate recorder is your best friend. This person will catch formatting errors – such as margins that are too wide or tables not formatted properly.

7. **Follow Up:**  
Double and triple check that all of the documentation and signatures needed to complete your degree are in order and turned in on time. This usually means gently prompting committee members send along signed paperwork (whether that be physical or electronic). Keep copies of everything that is signed and turned in.
8. **CELEBRATE:** Research statistics show that approximately 50% of people who begin a PhD program in the United States finally see those three letters behind their name. Earning a PhD is a significant victory requiring years of one's life and an immense amount of perseverance. As of 2020, [only 2%](#) of Americans possess a PhD, which makes this achievement worthy of celebration.